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CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTIONS OF: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by the Reporters sans frontières international, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 January 2002]

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*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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ENG

Cuba: The state maintains its monopoly on information

The release of two journalists from prison in 2001 did not herald a softening of the government's attitude towards the media, which is subtly but effectively repressed so as to maintain the state's monopoly control of information. The activity of independent journalists, including foreign press correspondents, is closely monitored.

Two journalists were freed early in 2001 – **Jesús Joel Díaz Hernández,** who had served half his sentence, and **Manuel Antonio González Castellanos,** a few weeks before he was due to be released. There is now only one journalist imprisoned in Cuba, **Bernardo Arévalo Padrón.**

But the regime is not really moving towards press freedom. Since the Constitution says that "under no circumstances" can the media be privately-owned, the state still has a complete monopoly on information. To protect its image, President Fidel Castro's government has instead chosen the way of indirect but just as effective repression of independent journalists, who it regards as "counter-revolutionaries." Interrogations of journalists fell slightly in 2001 to 29 (from the previous year's 39) but incidents of harassment rose sharply to around 100 (from 70 in 2000). The State Security Department (DES), which is part of the interior ministry, remains the chief agent of the repression. The year saw an increase in summonses of journalists, who were questioned and usually threatened with imprisonment or prosecution. Pressure was also exerted on their families. A nursery refused a place to the daughter of **Pablo Pacheco Ávila,** of the *Cooperativa Avileña de Periodistas Independientes.* The authorities also intercepted mail, tapped phones, organised mysterious physical attacks and visited people's homes to obstruct the work of independent journalists or persuade them to go into exile abroad. When they did get visas for foreign countries, the authorities tried to extract information from them about dissidents in exchange for granting the required exit visa.

The government also tried to squash any attempt by independent journalists to organise. The Manuel Márquez Sterling Association, set up in 2001, was prevented from giving journalism courses to about 40 of its members. But independent journalists still tried to exercise their right to inform and faxed or phoned their articles to members of the Cuban exile community who put them on Internet websites. This was tolerated by the government since it did not threaten its monopoly on news reaching the isolated mass of ordinary Cubans.
Cubans were not just "protected" from independent journalists. As part of the campaign against "ideological deviance," further action was taken during the year to remove from house roofs satellite dishes able to pick up foreign TV stations. Reception of foreign radio stations was also jammed. In January, a fierce campaign was launched in the government media against **Pascal Fletcher,** a reporter for *Reuters* news agency, after he wrote a report of a controversial parade organised by the Spanish embassy. President Castro accused "certain journalists" of asking to be punished with "expulsion" and called on their agencies to show "common sense." Two months later, Fletcher was transferred to a post in Caracas. The incident was seen as a warning to resident foreign journalists at a time when the US Tribune Co. media group and *The Dallas Morning News* were opening a bureau in Havana. **Earl Maucker,** one of the Tribune Co. editors, said the opening of the bureau had taken 10 years of negotiations with the Cuban government.

The control of information extends to the Internet, to which access is strictly regulated. Those who use it must agree to respect "the moral values of Cuban society and the country's laws" and only foreign companies and government institutions normally have access. But in September 2001, four post offices in Havana began allowing Cubans to have their own e-mail address and access to the Internet. But access is limited to government-approved websites known as the "Intranet." All state media – radio, TV and newspapers – put out news approved beforehand by the Department of Revolutionary Orientation. The code of conduct for journalists says they

must "contribute to the promotion of the constant improvement of our socialist society." Unusually, two state-media journalists went into exile abroad in 2001. The case of one of them, **Guillermo Morales Catá,** who had fallen out of favour after criticising government censorship of an official demonstration, showed the impossibility of reforming the regime from within.

Because of the serious situation in Cuba, President Castro is on Reporters sans Frontières' worldwide list of 39 "predators of press freedom."

Journalist jailed

The authorities twice refused requests (in April and February 2001) for the release on parole of **Bernardo Arévalo Padrón,** founder of the independent news agency *Linea Sur Press* in Aguada de Pasajeros, although normally he should have been granted it in October 2000 after completing half his sentence. He was said to be not yet "politically re-educated." He was accused of not following President Castro's televised speeches. He had been sentenced on appeal on 28 November 1997 to six years imprisonment for "insulting" the president and Vice-President Carlos Lage. He told a Miami radio station that the two leaders were "liars" for not respecting the democratic principles laid down by an earlier Ibero-American summit. Arévalo Padrón was beaten up by two state security officials in Ariza prison on 11 April 1998. He was transferred to the Medios Propios work camp in Cienfuegos province on 15 May 1999 and then to others where he was made to do weeding and cut sugar-cane. He has since suffered back and heart problems. He wrote a letter in June 2001 to journalist and poet Raúl Rivero describing the El Diamante camp where he was being held as a "concentration camp" plagued by "promiscuity, rats, humiliation, prostitution and lack of drinking water."

Pressure and obstruction

In March 2001, **Pascal Fletcher,** a Havana reporter for *Reuters* news agency and the British newspaper *The Financial Times,* left Cuba for a new post in Caracas, two months after being the target of a fierce campaign in the official media. On 6 January, the daily paper *Granma* had accused of him of trying to "poison the Cuban Revolution" and said he had "close ties with the US Interests Section" office in Havana. Three days later, he was attacked on television for having a "provocative, biased and treacherous attitude" after writing a story about a controversial parade organised by the Spanish embassy. These attacks were taken by all foreign correspondents in Cuba as a warning.

President Castro charged in a televised speech on the night of 17-18 January that "some agencies" were "not being at all impartial" and criticised "some of their employees" (who he did not name) for "defaming the Revolution." He accused them of asking to be punished with "expulsion," but said he preferred that "the agencies themselves show enough common sense to call them to account."